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 a rear wheel well, wherein said storage area is substantially centered relative to the width of the rear wheel associated with the wheel well adjacent to the storage area, wherein a hinged cover allows access to the storage area, and wherein the width of the storage area is the same or less than the width of the wheel well. _____

REMARKS

A Final Action was issued on February 1, 2002, rejecting Claims 103 and 107 under 35 U.S.C. 112, first paragraph, Claims 86, 100, 110, 114 and 115 under 35 U.S.C. 112, second paragraph, Claims 61, 62, 64-65, 109-110 and 112 under 35 U.S.C. 102(b), and Claims 49-56, 58-60, 63, 66-73, 85-86, 88, 89, 91-93, 98-108, and 110-125 under 35 U.S.C. 103(a).

Status of claims

This application was filed on May 22, 1998, with Claims 1-23. Claims 6, 8, 9 and 13 were canceled and Claims 24-33 added in a preliminary amendment filed concurrently. Claims 34-42 were added by amendment in response to the Office Action of August 18, 1998. Claims 43-48 were added by amendment in response to the Office Action of October 18, 1998. A Continued Prosecution Application (CPA) was filed on December 29, 2000 canceling Claims 2-5, 10-12, 14, and 24-48 and adding new Claims 49-97. Claims 75-84, 90 and 95 were canceled as drawn to a non-elected species and Claims 98-127 were added in response to the Office Action of June 6, 2001. Claim 1 is cancelled herein as drawn to a non-elected invention. Claims 63, 102, 112, 117 are canceled herein without prejudice or disclaimer. Claims 49-62, 64-74, 85-89, 91-94 and 96-101, 103-111, 113-116, and 118-127 are in the case.

The Specification is fully enabling for the subject matter of claims 103 and 107.

The final Action rejects claims 103 and 107 as containing subject matter which was not described in the specification in such a way as to reasonably convey to one skilled in the relevant

art that the inventors, at the time the application was filed, had possession of the claimed invention.

Claim 103 is drawn to a vehicle in which the hinged portion of the exterior side panel is located on an inner area of the side panel. Such a vehicle is described in the Specification at page 4 line 17, wherein is described the removal of an inner panel of the side panel and providing a hinged opening adjacent the removed inner panel. This would necessarily be on the inner portion of the side panel.

Full enablement for claim 107 is also found on page 4, at lines 24-25, in which is described the "narrow storage box, which may be as wide as the wheel wells of the vehicle, or narrower."

Based on the Specification, then, one of skill in the art would understand that the inventors had full possession of the claimed invention at the time of filing. Applicants respectfully request that this rejection be withdrawn.

Rejection of Claims 86, 100, 114 and 115 Under 35 U.S.C. §112, Second paragraph.

The rejection of claim 86 is moot.

The Action rejects claims 100, 114 and 115 on the ground that the term sport utility vehicle is a cultural phenomenon rather than a specific art term and could change over the life of the patent. This rejection is respectfully traversed as Applicants are unaware of any basis or authority for this ground of rejection. Applicants submit that the fact that the meaning of a term may change over the life of a patent is irrelevant since, "the literal meaning of a claim is fixed upon its issuance." *Al-Site Corp. v. VSI International, Inc.* 50 USPQ2d 1161, 1169 (Fed. Cir. 1999)

The term "sport utility vehicle" is a well known term in the art and reasonably conveys to one of skill in the art what the inventors regard as their invention.

Applicants submit that the design of any passenger vehicle is a cultural phenomenon, and the terms, pickup, truck, sedan, station wagon, car, or any other term describing a vehicle style may change or evolve over time. Attached hereto as Exhibit A are a page of the web site of the Sport Utility Vehicle Owners Association of America, and an SUV buyers guide. Both of these are indications that the public and certainly those of skill in the art understand the term "sport utility vehicle." One of skill would thus fully understand the meaning of the present claims, and the Applicants have fully met their burden under 112, second. Applicants respectfully request that this rejection be withdrawn.

Amendments to Drawings

Applicants respectfully traverse the objection to the drawings. However, should amendments to the drawings be deemed to be required for the allowance of otherwise allowable subject matter, the drawings will be amended at that time.

Claim Format

Applicants feel that the claim scope and the number of claims in the present application are within the rules and present no undue burden on the Examiner, nor do they obscure any "search for truth" as suggested by the Examiner. Applicants submit that, although some extra claims have been filed, at no time were there 127 claims before the Examiner (as suggested in the Action), and furthermore, Applicants have paid additional fees for the examination of extra claims. It is Applicants' intent and belief that the present claims are written to capture the full scope of the elected invention to which Applicants are entitled.

Election/Restriction

Applicants have canceled Claim 1 as drawn to a non-elected invention, and apologize for this oversight.

All rejections under 35 U.S.C. §102(b) should be withdrawn.

Claims 61, 62, 64-65, 109-110 and 112 are rejected under 35 U.S.C. §102(b) as anticipated by Perlman et al.

Applicants respectfully traverse this rejection in that the Perlman reference does not describe the subject matter of the rejected claims. It is clear from the Specification that the claims are drawn to vehicles which have the advantage of added secure storage that does not significantly alter the external conformation of the vehicles from that of conventional consumer-oriented vehicles, and that does not significantly detract from the interior storage space in the vehicle.

In contrast, Perlman is directed to a utility truck body, which makes no attempt to align the storage boxes with the cab. Perlman states that truck bodies conventionally have "two large upstanding structures along the sides of the truck body," and that these "large enclosures" are divided into several compartments (column 1). Perlman is thus describing utility trucks and Figure 1 of Perlman appears to show a utility truck style bed in which the tool boxes extend well outside of the width of the cab.

Perlman, thus, does not describe a vehicle in which "the separation width and cross sectional contour of the side panels of the enclosure is substantially the same as the separation width and cross-sectional contour of the forward compartment where it adjoins the side panels of the enclosure" as in amended claim 61. Even the Office Action admits on page 6 in paragraph 12

that Perlman does not describe "a bed width aligned with the cab" and points out the disadvantage of having the bed stick out past the cab (inadvertent contact with the bed).

Thus, all the elements of Claim 61 do not appear in the Perlman reference as is necessary for a rejection under 102(b). Since the Perlman et al. reference does not describe every element of the rejected claims, Applicants respectfully request that this rejection be withdrawn.

Because the dependent claims incorporate all the elements of the claim from which they depend, dependent claims 62, 64-65, 109-110 and 112, the Perlman reference can in no way be said to anticipate the more narrow dependent claims. Applicants respectfully request that all rejections under §102 be withdrawn.

All rejections under 35 U.S.C. §103(a) should be withdrawn because the Examiner has failed to make a *prima facie* case of obviousness over any of the cited art.

Applicants submit that the Examiner has not met his burden of making a *prima facie* case of obviousness based on the cited references in any combination. The first burden on the Examiner is to point to some suggestion or motivation, either in the references themselves or in the knowledge generally available to one of ordinary skill in the art to modify the reference teachings. Second, there must be a reasonable expectation of success, and finally, the prior art references when combined must teach or suggest all the claim limitations. The teaching or suggestion to make the claimed combination and the reasonable expectation of success must both be found in the prior art, and not based on the applicant's disclosure. *In re Vaeck*, 947 F.2d 488, 20 USPQ2d 1438 (Fed. Cir. 1991). Because no *prima facie* case has been made by the Examiner, Applicants have no burden to present evidence of non-obviousness. Applicants request that the Examiner provide evidence, other than his own conclusory statements, that the cited references are properly combinable or withdraw all rejections under §103.

Rejections over Perlman et al. in view of Payne et al.

The Action rejects claim 63 over Perlman et al. in view of Payne et al., stating that it would have been obvious to provide in Perlman et al. a bed width aligned with the cab width as taught by Payne in order to prevent inadvertent contact with the bed. Claim 63 is deleted herein and the limitations of claim 63 have been incorporated into claim 61. Applicants respectfully traverse the rejection of claim 63, and direct the comments below to the subject matter of claim 61 as amended to include the subject matter of dependent claim 63.

Applicants respectfully submit that the Examiner has not made a *prima facie* case of obviousness. The Examiner has not produced any motivation from the prior art itself to combine the teachings of Perlman et al. with the description found in Payne and neither do Applicants find any such motivation in the cited references.

Should the Perlman and Payne references be properly combinable, which they are not, the combination still would not reach the claimed invention. There is no suggestion in Payne et al. to modify the tool boxes of utility trucks, but rather Payne et al. describes an improvement in pick up tool boxes that are conventionally "removably secured within the truck bed." (see column 1) Payne's solution to the problem is to move the bed back and insert a tool box between the bed and the cab (see Abstract and Figure 2). This in no way teaches or suggests the present claimed invention. In addition, adding a tool box between the bed and the cab of the utility truck described in Perlman et al. also would not teach or suggest the present claimed invention.

The action states that it would be obvious to provide in Perlman a bed width aligned with the cab width as taught by Payne et al. to prevent inadvertent contact with the bed. The Examiner's attempt at providing a motivation to combine the references is based on the Applicants' own disclosure, and is nothing more than hindsight reconstruction of the claims. Any

motivation to address a problem of the width of utility beds, or even a statement of the problem, however, does not appear in the prior art references, and is not the proper basis for an obviousness rejection.

In light of the preceding, Applicants submit that the Examiner has not made a *prima facie* case of obviousness as there is no reason to combine the references and furthermore, such a combination would not reach the subject matter of claim 63 (or claim 61 as amended). Applicants respectfully request, therefore that all rejections over Perlman et. in view of Payne et al. be withdrawn.

Rejections over Perlman et al. in view of Holan et al.

Claims 66-70, 72, 114-119, 123 and 124 are not obvious over Perlman et al. in view of Holan et al. The Examiner has again failed to make a *prima facie* case of obviousness as discussed above. Claims 66-70 and 72 are dependent from claim 61 and thus incorporate all the limitations of claim 61 by reference. Perlman has been discussed in reference to claim 61 above, and the deficiencies of the Perlman reference are not remedied by the Holan et al. reference.

The Action states simply that "It would have been obvious to one of ordinary skill in the art to provide in Perlman et al. multiple hinged sections as taught by Holan et al. on the vehicle in order to store additional items. This is merely an obvious duplication of parts."

This rejection thus appears to be based on the erroneous presumption that Perlman describes all the elements of claim 61 and claims 66-70, 72, other than multiple hinged sections. Holan, however, appears to show just another utility truck and in no way describes the invention of claims dependent on claim 61. A combination of the Perlman and Holan references would appear to result in a utility truck with multiple hinged sections in the tool boxes as is described in Holan, but would not describe the invention of claim 61.

Neither would the combined references describe the invention of claim 114. Because there is no suggestion or motivation to combine the references, and because such a combination would not teach or suggest the claimed invention, Applicants respectfully request that this rejection be withdrawn.

The rejection of claims 71 over Perlman et al in view of Holan et al and further in view of Douglass, Jr.

The Action, in rejecting claim 71, offers no motivation (found in the references themselves) to combine the teachings of the three cited references, nor does it explain how such a combination would result in the claimed invention. Douglas, Jr appears to describe another utility truck with bulky side boxes that are not contoured and that appear to extend well beyond the width of the cab. Thus the cited references, all of which describe utility vehicles with large storage boxes extending beyond the cab, in no way teach or suggest the claimed invention and Applicants respectfully request that this rejection be withdrawn.

Rejections over Perlman et al. in view of Holan et al. and further in view of McGloughlin

Claim 73 is rejected over Perlman et al. in view of Holan et al. and further in view of McGloughlin. Again, the Action provides no motivation, found in the prior art to combine the references. In addition, McGloughlin does not address or remedy the deficiencies of the Perlman and Holan references, but rather describes a rudimentary trunk in the rear of a passenger vehicle that includes an arcuate member and a pin, that serve to hold the trunk in an open position. Adding this member to the vehicles of Perlman or Holan, would not result in the claimed invention. Applicants respectfully request that this rejection be withdrawn.

Rejections over Holan et al. in view of Perlman et al.

Claims 49-50, 53, 54, 55, 58, 60, 98-103, and 106-108 are rejected over Holan et al. in view of Perlman et al.

Applicants have previously addressed the lack of any motivation in the references that would lead one of skill to combine their teachings. Should such motivation exist, which it does not, the combination of the teachings of Holan and Perlman would not describe the present invention. This has been addressed above in relation to claim 61, and applies also to claim 49 and claims dependent thereon.

Claim 49, as amended is even further distinguished from the cited references. Claim 49 now explicitly claims vehicles in which a driver compartment and a cargo area disposed to the rear of the driver compartment are included within a single enclosure. This amendment is supported throughout the Specification and examples of such vehicles are shown in Figures 5-8 and 20. Thus no new matter is added by this amendment. In addition, claims 100 and 101, dependent from claim 49 are drawn to a sports utility vehicle and a van, both of which would be included in the element newly added to claim 49. Applicants respectfully request, therefore, that the rejections of claims 49-50, 53, 54, 55, 58, 60, 98-103, and 106-108 be withdrawn.

In light of the preceding discussion, Applicants further request the withdrawal of the rejection of claims dependent of claim 49 including the rejection of claim 56 over Holan et al. in view of Perlman and further in view of Perlman and further in view of McGloughlin; withdrawal of the rejection of claim 59 over Holan in view of Perlman and further in view of McGloughlin; the rejection of claims 51, 52, and 105 over Holan et al. in view of Perlman et al and further in view of Douglass Jr.; and the rejection of claim 104 over Holan et al. in view of Perlman et al. and further in view of Lewellen et al., all of which are overcome.

Rejections over Perlman et al. in view of Lewellen et al. and McGloughlin.

Claims 85-86, 89, 91 and 92 are rejected over Perlman in view of Lewellen et al, Design 364,591 and McGloughlin.

Applicants again assert that the Examiner has failed to make a *prima facie* case of obviousness, as no motivation for combining the teachings is found in any of the cited references. For example, Applicants see no way in which the teachings of Perlman could be combined with Lewellen, since the two references appear to describe completely different types of vehicles. Any combination, however, would include storage areas that extend beyond the width of the cab and are not aligned with the sides of the cab, since that feature appears in all the vehicles described in both references. For that reason alone, the references can in no way be said to teach or suggest the claimed invention.

Claim 85 is also amended in a similar manner to claim 49 to include the element that the claimed vehicles include the drivers compartment and rear compartment within a single enclosure. This claim and all claims dependent on claim 85 are thus even more clearly distinguished from the cited references. Again, the amendments are clearly supported by Figures 5-8 and 20 and by the description throughout the Specification. Applicants respectfully request that all rejections of claim 85 and claims dependent thereon be withdrawn. In light of this discussion, Applicants thus further request withdrawal of the rejection of claim 88 over Perlman et al. in view of Lewellen et al and McGloughlin and further in view of Gallagher et al. and the rejection of claim 93 over Holan et al. in view of Perlman and further in view of Payne.

Rejections over Lewellen et al. in view of Holan et al.

Applicants submits that Lewellen and Holan are not properly combinable in an obviousness rejection. The Action merely states that storage areas may be behind moveable

doors and the width of the storage areas are shown in Lewellen. This conclusory statement provides no motivation from the prior art itself, that would lead one to combine the references. The Examiner has again attempted a hindsight reconstruction of the claim. However, Claim 125, as amended, is now more clearly distinguished over Lewellen et al. in view of Holan et al.

Rejections over Perlman et al.

The action rejects claims 110-113 over Perlman et al. stating that application of the teachings of Perlman over any currently manufactured vehicle would be obvious to one of ordinary skill. Applicants do not find, however, and the Action does not point to any suggestion in Perlman that the vehicles described therein should be modified to create the vehicles of claims 110-113, dependent on claim 61. Since Perlman does not anticipate nor render obvious the parent claim as discussed above, it in no way renders the dependent claims obvious. Applicants respectfully request that this rejection be withdrawn.

Rejections over Perlman et al. in view of Holan et al and further in view of Ward.

Claims 120-122 over Perlman et al. in view of Holan et al and further in view of Ward. The rejection of claim 114, upon which claims 120-122 are dependent, over Perlman in view of Holan, was discussed above. Again, the Examiner has provided no teaching from the prior art that would motivate one of skill to combine the teachings of Perlman and Holan with Ward. Choosing a single element (the locks described in the Ward reference) to combine with the other references is merely an attempt at hindsight reconstruction of the claimed invention. Applicants respectfully request that this rejection be withdrawn.

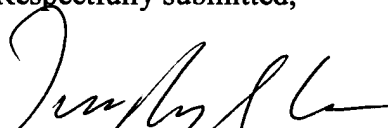
CONCLUSION

The foregoing is intended to be a complete response to the Office Action. Applicant respectfully submits that from the foregoing observations and arguments, the claims are in

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condition for allowance. Such favorable action is respectfully requested. If the Examiner should have questions or comments regarding this response, a telephone call to the undersigned at 512-542-8446 is welcomed.

Respectfully submitted,



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A marked up version of the claims as amended:

49. (Twice amended) A storage system for a vehicle having a driver compartment and a cargo area disposed to the rear of the driver compartment within a contiguous enclosure, wherein the [cargo area] enclosure is defined by a floor [panel], a roof, and two opposing side walls which each connect the roof to the floor, and wherein the cargo area includes opposing rear wheel wells extending into the cargo area from the bottom edges of the side panels,

the storage system comprising
at least one storage area adjacent to and separated from the cargo area, the storage area being defined by at least a portion of an outwardly bowed exterior side panel, an inner panel, a top and bottom which connect the inner panel to the exterior side panel, and wherein the storage area extends into the cargo area no further than the wheel well extends into the cargo area,
wherein at least one section of at least one of the outwardly bowed exterior side panels is hinged to provide access to the storage area therein.

50. (Amended) The storage system of Claim 49, wherein at least one storage area extends over at least one rear wheel well.

51. (Amended) The storage system of Claim 49, wherein at least one storage area extends forward and rearward from at least one wheel well.

52. (Amended) The storage system of Claim 49, wherein at least one storage area is constructed to extend along a substantial portion of the side panel.

53. The storage system of Claim 49, wherein the storage area is enclosed and the enclosed storage area includes a plurality of cooperating latch members mounted on the storage area and the at least one hinged section of the at least one side panel.

54. The storage system of Claim 49, further comprising at least one mechanism for retaining the at least one hinged section closed.

55. The storage system of Claim 49, wherein each side of the vehicle is provided with at least one storage area and at least one hinged section.

56. The storage system of Claim 49, additionally including at least one strut assembly operatively connected to retain the at least one hinged section of the side panel in an opened position.

57. The storage system of Claim 56, wherein the at least one strut assembly provides a temperature control during use, the control being insulation, heating, or insulation and heating.

58. (Amended) The storage system of Claim 49, wherein at least one of the side panels includes more than one hinged section that is capable of being opened to expose the storage area.

59. The storage system of Claim 49, additionally including at least one drain/air relief valve assembly mounted in the at least one storage area.

60. The storage system of Claim 49, wherein the at least one storage area includes at least one of an adjustable shelf, a slideable shelf, a movable shelf, or a drawer.

61. (Twice amended) A vehicle having a forward compartment for carrying a driver and an enclosure for passengers, merchandise or equipment wherein the enclosure is disposed to the rear of the driver compartment, and further wherein the enclosure is bounded by exterior, contoured side panels and a rear wall, including at least one rear door;

the vehicle comprising at least one storage area adjacent at least one exterior, contoured side panel and extending into the enclosure of the vehicle, and wherein the side panel adjacent the storage area includes a hinged section effective to provide an opening from the exterior of the

vehicle into the storage area, and further wherein the separation width and cross sectional contour of the side panels of the enclosure is substantially the same as the separation width and cross-sectional contour of the forward compartment where it adjoins the side panels of the enclosure.

62. The storage system of Claim 61, wherein the storage system is located intermediate the driver compartment and the rear door.

64. (Twice amended) The vehicle of Claim [63] 61, wherein the storage system is mounted in the side panel of the enclosure on the driver's side of the vehicle.

65. (Twice amended) The vehicle of Claim [63] 61, wherein there is a storage system mounted in the side panels of the enclosure on both sides of the vehicle.

66. (Amended) The vehicle of Claim 61, additionally including at least two hinged sections on at least one side of the enclosure, the hinged sections enabling access to at least a portion of the interior of the storage area.

67. (Amended) The vehicle of Claim 61, wherein a storage area is located one of forward or rearward of the wheel well.

68. (Amended) The vehicle of Claim 61, wherein a storage area is located over the wheel well.

69. (Amended) The vehicle of Claim 68, wherein the hinged section is located entirely above the wheel well.

70. (Amended) The vehicle of Claim 68, wherein the hinged section is located over the wheel well.

71. (Amended) The vehicle of Claim 68, wherein the hinged section is located forward and rearward of the wheel well.

72. (Amended) The vehicle of Claim 66, wherein at least one of the hinged sections is hinged horizontally.

73. The vehicle of Claim 61, additionally including at least one strut assembly operatively connected to retain the hinged section in an opened position.

74. The vehicle of Claim 73, wherein the at least one strut assembly provides a temperature control during use, the control being insulation, heating, or heating and insulation.

85. (Twice amended) A vehicle comprising a driver's compartment and a rear compartment contained within the same enclosure, the rear compartment including a storage system, the rear compartment comprising:

a floor area bounded on either side by side panels with exterior surfaces defining the width of the rear compartment, and wherein the side panels of the rear compartment are substantially aligned with the driver's compartment,

at least one hinged section in the exterior surface of at least one of the side panels,

at least one storage area located intermediate the side panels, adjacent the at least one hinged section, and extending into a cargo area of the vehicle, wherein the hinged section is configured to provide access to the storage area when the hinged section is in the open position and wherein the width of the storage area is the same or less than the width of the wheel well;

a latch for retaining the at least one hinged contoured side panel section in the closed position; and

a strut for retaining the hinged section in the open position.

86. (Twice Amended) The vehicle of Claim 85, wherein the at least one hinged section is hinged one of horizontally or vertically.

87. (Amended) The vehicle of Claim 85, wherein a temperature control for the strut is provided by at least one of insulating, heating, or heating and insulating.

88. The vehicle of Claim 85, additionally including at least one drain/air relief valve assembly mounted in the at least one storage area.

89. (Amended) The vehicle of Claim 85, wherein the vehicle includes at least one hinged section in each of the outwardly bowed side panels and at least one storage area located adjacent the hinged sections.

91. The vehicle of Claim 85, wherein the rear compartment comprises a passenger compartment.

92. The vehicle of Claim 85, wherein the rear compartment comprises a cargo area.

93. (Twice amended) The storage system of Claim 49, wherein the exterior surfaces of the side panels enclosing the cargo area are substantially aligned with the exterior surfaces of the driver's compartment.

94. (Amended) A vehicle comprising a driver's compartment and a rear compartment, the rear compartment including a storage system, the rear compartment comprising:

a floor area with opposing edges, a roof with opposing edges, and bounded on either side by side panels extending from the opposing edges of the floor panel to the opposing edges of the roof, and being outwardly bowed, defining the width of the rear compartment and at least one hinged section in the exterior surface of at least one of the side panels,

at least one storage area located intermediate the side panels, adjacent the at least one hinged section, and extending into a cargo area of the vehicle, wherein the hinged section is

configured to provide access to the storage area when the hinged section is in the open position;
and

a strut for retaining the hinged section in the open position, wherein a temperature control for the strut is provided by at least one of insulating, heating, or heating and insulating.

96. The vehicle of Claim 94, wherein the rear compartment comprises a passenger compartment.

97. The vehicle of Claim 94, wherein the rear compartment comprises a cargo area.

98. The storage system of Claim 49 wherein one section of at least one of the outwardly bowed side panels is hinged to open outwardly to the exterior of the vehicle.

99. The storage system of Claim 49 wherein more than one section of at least one of the outwardly bowed side panels is hinged to open outwardly to the exterior of the vehicle.

100. The storage system of Claim 49 wherein the vehicle having a cargo area is a sports utility vehicle.

101. The storage system of Claim 49 wherein the vehicle having a cargo area is a van.

103. The storage system of Claim 49 wherein the hinged portion of the exterior side panel is located on an inner area of the side panel.

104. The storage system of Claim 50 wherein the width of the storage area is less than the width of the wheel well.

105. The storage system of Claim 50 wherein the width of the storage area is approximately the same as the width of the wheel well.

106. The storage system of Claim 49 wherein a portion of the side wall of the cargo area is the opposing side of the inner panel of the storage area.

107. The storage system of Claim 50 wherein the width of the storage area is less than the width of the wheel well.

108. The storage system of Claim 49 wherein the storage system is fabricated on an assembly line.

109. The vehicle of Claim 61 wherein the storage area is inaccessible from the enclosure.

110. The vehicle of Claim 61 wherein the vehicle is a sports utility vehicle.

111. The vehicle of Claim 61 wherein the vehicle is a van.

113. The vehicle of Claim 61 wherein the vehicle is fabricated on an assembly line.

114. (Amended) An improved vehicle [selected from the group consisting of a sport utility vehicle, a van, and a utility vehicle] having a forward compartment configured to contain a driver's seat and a cargo area, wherein the cargo area is defined by a floor panel, a roof, and two opposing side walls which each connect the roof to the floor, having outwardly bowed side panels, wherein the cross-sectional contour of the side panels of the cargo area substantially conform to the exterior of the forward compartment, the improvement comprising:

a storage area accessible only from the exterior of the vehicle, said storage area being located adjacent a rear wheel well and extending along at least a portion of the vehicle's outwardly bowed side panel.

115. The vehicle of Claim 114 wherein the vehicle is a sports utility vehicle.

116. The vehicle of Claim 114 wherein the vehicle is a van.

118. The vehicle of Claim 114 wherein the storage area extending along at least a portion of the vehicle's side panel is accessible via a hinged section in the side panel.

119. The vehicle of Claim 114 wherein the storage area is substantially centered relative to the width of the rear wheel associated with the wheel well adjacent to the storage area.

120. The vehicle of Claim 118 wherein the storage area further comprises a lock mechanism which is not visible from an external view of the vehicle.

121. The vehicle of Claim 120 wherein the lock mechanism is cable actuated.

122. The vehicle of Claim 121 wherein the lock mechanism is electrically activated.

123. The vehicle of Claim 118 wherein the storage area further comprises a key actuated lock mechanism.

124. The vehicle of Claim 118 wherein the storage area further comprises at least one shelf.

125. (Amended) In a vehicle [having a cargo area bounded by a bottom panel, a top panel, and two opposing outwardly bowed side panels which connect the bottom panel to the top panel] configured to contain in the interior of the vehicle, one, two or three rows of seats, and further to contain a cargo area behind the last row of seats, wherein the vehicle further contains one or two doors in each side of the vehicle for access to the interior thereof, and a rear wheel well on each side of the vehicle that extends from the external side panel into the interior of the vehicle, the improvement which comprises:

at least one storage area [inaccessible from within the cargo area], wherein said storage area is located between at least one of the rearmost doors in one side of the vehicle and the rear of the vehicle on the same side, adjacent to a rear wheel well, [the storage area being defined by at least a portion of an outwardly bowed exterior side panel, an inner panel, a top, and a bottom which connect the inner panel to the exterior side panel,] wherein said storage area is substantially centered relative to the width of the rear wheel associated with the wheel well

adjacent to the storage area, wherein a hinged cover allows access to the storage area, and wherein the width of the storage area is the same or less than the width of the wheel well.

126. A storage system for a vehicle having a cargo area and a pair of side panels disposed on either side of the cargo area, the storage system comprising at least one storage area located intermediate the side panels and extending into the cargo area of the vehicle, and comprising:

at least one opening effective to expose the interior of the storage area;

at least one section of at least one of the side panels being hinged, the hinged section effective to provide access to the storage area therein,

and wherein said storage system comprises at least one strut assembly operatively connected to retain the at least one hinged section of the side panel in an opened position and wherein the at least one strut assembly provides a temperature control during use, the control being insulation, heating, or heating and insulation.

127. A vehicle having a forward compartment for carrying a driver and an enclosure for passengers, merchandise or equipment wherein the enclosure is disposed to the rear of the driver compartment, and further wherein the enclosure is bounded by side panels and a rear wall, including at least one rear door, the vehicle comprising at least one storage area adjacent at least one side panel and extending into the enclosure of the vehicle, and wherein at least one side panel includes a hinged section effective to provide an opening from the exterior of the vehicle into the storage area and a mechanism for securing the at least one hinged section in the closed position,

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wherein said vehicle includes at least one strut assembly operatively connected to retain the hinged section in an opened position and wherein the at least one strut assembly provides a temperature control during use, the control being insulation, heating, or heating and insulation.